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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a brief history and philosophy of the origins of bel canto vocal style and describes the pedagogical methods used to achieve bel canto ideals in singing. The document discusses the adoption and development of this technique and how it developed over long periods of preparation in the foregoing centuries before the Baroque era. (Contains 14 references.) (EH)

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EARLY MUSICAL TRAINING IN BEL CANTO VOCAL TECHNIQUE: A BRIEF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

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The origins of bel canto singing are often attributed to Claudio Monteverdi and Giulio Caccini, early composers of the Baroque aria for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment, and to the Florentine Camerata, originators of the opera in recitative style. However, these two modes of expression, which enabled the art of bel canto to be established and to develop rapidly in less than two centuries, were not the creation of a moment. Rather, their adoption and development were preceded by long periods of preparation in the foregoing centuries. Commencing with Hellenic art and evolving gradually, there is a continuous development in the spirit and forms of Italian vocal music leading to the monodic song and recitative of the seventeenth century.

Ancient Greek musical art reached its highest perfection through the medium of rhythm, both in dance and in poetry. Both of these forms employed melody as an auxiliary or a decorative device, not as an independent means of expression. Plato, for example, did not concede the expressive significance of melody, and disapproved of the use of purely instrumental music in which melody was the predominant element:

> For they (the muses) behold all these things jumbled together, and how, also the poets rudely

> tuneless words into meter, or leaving tune and rhythm without words, and using the bare sound of harp or flute, wherein it is almost impossible to understand, what is intended by this wordless rhythm and harmony...Such methods, as one ought to realize, are clownish in the extreme in mechanical accuracy and the imitation of animal sounds, and consequently employ the pipe and harp without the accompaniment of dance and song; for the use of either of these instruments by itself is the mark of the mountebank or boor. [1]

Plato also wrote "...in song the rhythm and the words are of principal importance, the tones of the least." [2] The evolution of music in Greece, therefore, was essentially through rhythm and accent of the text. With the inception of lyric poetry, the human voice began to discover continually intensifying means of expression in the rhythm of the verses; new melodies were invented, but their strophic form reveals that melody continued to function in a decorative manner.

The shift in the emphasis from rhythm and words to tones and melody, and therefore to tone quality, occurred in medieval music, specifically chant. The form of the melody in Gregorian chant especially, is one in which the singer can, within the personal limits of his vocal compass and range of intonation, sing freely with an expressive coloration. The

tropes and melismas, and later they hymns and sequences which gave rise to the secular music of the minstrels and troubadours (especially the cantori a liuto, songs with lute accompaniment), were all forms of expressive song. This type of musical expression generated the need for a system of developing the musical quality in the voices of singers; it was no longer felt to be satisfactory to let the individual sing merely as his natural instincts permitted. A need was felt to develop the singer's

> ...gifts by training, to study the most suitable means for correcting the defects and amplifying the good qualities of the voice in order to render it as beautiful as possible, and thus to be in a position to profit by the fine properties of the tone so as to make the melody increasingly expressive through the agency of excellence of interpretation. [3]

The Scholae Cantorum, musical conservatories first established by Pope Sylvester during the fourth century and enlarged and rebuilt by Pope Gregory during the seventh century, became directly responsible for the vocal development of both the clergy and the members of the choir. [4] Talented orphans were also sent there for musical instruction. During the nine-year term of apprenticeship at a Schola Cantorum, the

musical preparation of the students was directed toward a slow and thorough mastery of every phase of the vocal art. Emphasizing the cultivation of the legato and the flexibility necessary in order to properly achieve the undulating floridity of chant, the students became well-schooled singers and masters of a sound technique of tone production. [5]

The development of a musically discerning public, due greatly to exposure to the highly trained church singers, evolved directly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the coloristic vocal expressiveness in secular music. [6] The various songs of the roving minstrels of the Middle Ages, and the lays of the Provence troubadours, prepared the way for the ars nova of the fourteenth century. The caccia and madrigal of fourteenth century Italy are forms in which the leading part is usually a melody of freely expressive character.

From the Burgundian and Flemish influences of the fifteenth century, a period of transition in music as in all of the arts, emerged in the sixteenth century composers such as Palestrina, Vittoria, Marenzio, and Gabrieli. Although influenced by the polyphonic Flemish style, all of these composers maintained the dominance of the lyrical expression of the singing voice, a fundamental characteristic of Italian vocal composition. [7] One regulation issued by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), by insisting that words should be so sung as to be understood, maintains that by their close interrelationship, words and music should mutually enhance

their expressive power. [8] This consequence of the entire trend of Italian vocal music from the twelfth century onward, is a fundamental principle and characteristic of bel canto, that is, the search for beauty and purity of vocal tone. From this concept were derived all the consequences of the pedagogical and practical tendencies which characterize methods of bel canto singing and instruction from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries.

At the time of the first opera in 1600, Dafne, there was then an abundance of vocal technique, ability, and expertise to be drawn upon. Caccini, joint composer with Peri of Euridice, the world's second opera, was himself a noted singer. His daughter, who sang the title role of the opera, had an international reputation. In Caccini's collection of vocal compositions entitled Le Nuove Musiche (1602) can be seen nearly all of the notoriously exacting demands which are considered to be characteristics of Italian vocal composition of the succeeding two centuries.

It is believed that the singers of the first operas were trained in precisely the same manner as had been the church singers. A description by Giovanni Andrea Bontempi (Italian composer and writer, 1624-1705) of the scheme of studies at the schola cantorum of his time is an indication of the thoroughness and high purpose of the training.

One hour was spent on the messa di voce

("placing the voice") by the practice of a controlled crescendo-diminuendo effect on long, sustained notes together with the singing of intervals of special difficulty for the acquirement of richness of tone and a true attack. The second hour was given to the practice of the trill; the third to flexibility exercises and rapid roulades and, lastly, an hour was given to the "cultivation of taste and expression" --that is, in the vocal ornamentation which was expected of singers of the time. All this, under the scrutiny of the teacher, had to be performed before a mirror in order to avoid any untoward grimaces or facial distortions. In the afternoon, the students went "through the Porta Angelica, not far from Monte Mario, in order to sing against their own echo" thus enabling them to hear their own voices. To this was added the frequent experience of taking part in the great festival performances or listening to the famous singers of the day. [9]

Pietro Francesco Tosi (1647-1732), contralto castrato and singing teacher, in his book Observations On The Florid Song, outlines the proper sequence of vocal study as: (1) `placing of the voice;' (2) gymnastic vocalization on

vowels; (3) the study of ornaments; and (4) the singing of songs with words. [10] He summarized his philosophy of the vocal art in the consoling words which he offered to students of voice.

> Let him...who studies...remember for his comfort that singing in tune, expression, messa di voce, the appogiaturas, trills, divisions and accompanying himself are the principal qualifications; and no such insuperable difficulties but what may be overcome. I know that they are not sufficient to enable one to sing in perfection, and that it would be weakness to content one's self with only singing tolerably well; but embellishments must be called to their aid, which seldom refuse the call, and sometimes come unsought. Study will do the business. [11]

Generally, slow practice in the earlier stages was insisted upon. Much attention was given to the character of vowel sounds; study began with open vowels and proceeded to closed vowels. Thorough knowledge of text and how to interpret it was a primary consideration. Long study of solfeggio was necessary; singing at lessons was unaccompanied, in order that the student build a sure basis for correct

intervals and pitch. Much stress was placed on the clear articulation of syllables; to make the text intelligible to the listener was the chief aim of the singer in every kind of music, especially recitative. In the records of the teachings of the Italian singing masters, it is notable that nothing is written about volume of sound. Apparently, power was regarded as a result of natural development.[12] It was generally agreed that cultivation of the voice should begin in the middle, and that extension of range upward and downward should be undertaken only when the middle part of the voice was correctly used; there must be neither strain nor haste in extending the range. A basic exercise, the accentus, was a form of diminution, in which a simple melody was broken up into shorter notes. After the accentus were taught the tremolo, gruppetto and trill, leading to extended passages of coloratura, also called gorgheggi. Clarity of tone was the first requisite; agility was acquired slowly. Nicolo Porpora (1686-1766), who claimed among his pupils many singers whose names are still remembered, is said to have confined his pupil Cafarelli for five or six years to exercises written on one sheet of paper. At the end of this time, he sent Caffarelli into the world with his blessing: "Go my son, I can teach you nothing more. You are now the greatest singer in Europe." This story, which is found in many music encyclopedias and extended music histories, is probably an exaggeration, since the technique and style of a singer such as Caffarelli cannot

be formed by one page of exercises. However, it does embody the principle of slow, patient work, and of gradual development.

In A General History of Music, Charles Burney gives a contemporary description of the resultant singing, developed through bel canto techniques, that was valued in the eighteenth century. He describes the voice of the castrato soprano Pacchierotti, who was a favorite singer in London for the last twenty years of the eighteenth century.

> The natural tone of his voice is so interesting, sweet, and pathetic, that when he had a long note, or messa di voce, I never wished him to change it, or to do anything but swell, diminish, or prolong it in whatever way he pleased, to the utmost limit of his lungs. A great compass of voice downwards, with an ascent up to Bb and sometimes to C in alt, with an unbounded fancy, and a power not only of executing the most refined and difficult passages of other singers, but of inventing new embellishments, which, far as my musical reading and experience extended, had never then been on paper, made him, during his long residence here, a new singer to me every time I heard him. If the different degrees of sweetness in musical tones to the ear might be

> compared to the effects of different flavours on the palate, it would perhaps convey my idea of its perfection by saying that it is as superior to the generality of vocal sweetness, as that of the pine apple is, not only to other fruits, but to sugar or treacle. Many voices, though clear and well in tune, are yet insipid and uninteresting, for want of piquancy and flavour. A more perfect shake on short notice, and in every degree of velocity, I never heard. His execution of rapid divisions was so true and so distinct, that, with a loud and vulgar-toned voice, he would have been admired as a bravura singer; but the natural tone, and, if I may so call it, sentimental expression, and character of his voice, is such, as to make many hearers lament his condescending to rival the lark, or ever, even in pathetic songs, quitting simplicity in order to change or embellish a passage in the most new, artful, or ingenious manner possible. [13]

It must be admitted that the singular vocal technique and virtuosity of the bel canto artists may be impossible to achieve today. The bizarre custom which resulted in the unnatural vocal gifts of the castrati is fortunately no longer countenanced. However, the bel canto ideals of beautiful tone

and florid line are still highly desirable in performance. It is largely a responsibility of the voice teachers of today to thoroughly study and understand the required techniques in order to achieve bel canto ideals with their students.

NOTES

[1] Philip A. Duey, Bel Canto in Its Golden Age (New York: King's Crown Press, Columbia University, 1951), p.25.

[2] Giulio Silvia, "The Beginnings of the Art of Bel Canto, "The Musical Quarterly viii (January 1922):55.

[3] Silva, p. 57.

[4] The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians, 9th ed., s.v. "Singing."

[5] Ibid.

[6] Silva, p. 58.

[7] Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 5th ed., s.v. "Singing."

[8] Silva, p. 60.

[9] Grove's s.v. "Singing."

[10] The Oxford Companion to Music, 10th ed., s.v. "Singing."

[11] Henry Pleasants, The Great Singers (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), p. 23.

[12] Duey, p. 156.

[13] Charles Burney, A General History of Music, 2 vols., (New York: Dover Publications., 1935; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1957), 2:887-888.

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